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ABSTRACT

Teaching writing on the basis of purposes has certain advantages over teaching on the basis of techniques. The primary advantage is the greater resemblance to "real writing." Most student writing is apprentice work, as students themselves know, but it is far easier to point to nonacademic analogues of the categories of purpose (definition, substantiation, evaluation, and recommendation) than it is to point to the techniques standing alone (exposition, description, narration, process analysis, comparison/contrast, classification, analogy, and so forth). A second advantage of an approach through purposes is that students see progress in their knowledge of rhetoric, for the categories themselves are incremental, building from definition to recommendation. Finally, the approach to writing through purposes returns emphasis to first principles, placing priority on what is needed rather than on how to go about what is needed. Bringing purpose to the fore also brings value implications to the fore, such that once a goal is stated its appropriateness can be addressed. (RL)

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Towards a Functional Taxonomy of Composition

"Today we have naming of parts."

Writing, like anything else, can be divided into manageable segments in order to be comprehended. Nobody teaches simply "writing"; everyone who teaches writing fashions a series of compositional experiences, dividing the larger subject into meaningful and manageable parts. The problem of how best to divide and conquer writing, which by its very nature as personal expression may come in as many types as there are examples, has been addressed in many different ways. We intend here not to survey them all, because histories of rhetorical approaches abound, but to duscuss two basically different responses to the challenge. One we shall call the approach through techniques; the other, the approach through purposes. As these terms imply, one emphasizes means; the others, ends. Most teachers of composition in American calleges and universities probably stress the first, while teachers of speech communication stress the second. Walter C. Ong has analyzed the origins and consequences of this unfortunate split in "Literacy and Orality in Our Times," ADE Bulletin (September, 1978).

The Use of techniques, with its emphasis on how things are done, corresponds to many other social and pedagogical approaches in a society increasingly preoccupied with technique in general and with its partner, technology (the science of technique). It responds to the fundamental human

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need to use tools of every sort, including language, to manipulate our surroundings, including other people. In the broadest sense, perhaps, it is a way of coping. In an increasingly mechanized society, people require highly diverse coping skills. We routinely use dozens of machines each day. We employ many different tactics in dealing with other people, as the behavioral scientists point out. We share an apprehensiveness, in fact, that if we do not learn the relevant technique, then other people and a multitude of machines and gadgets, acting as if self-propelled, will manage us.

Preoccupation with technique, then, has excellent social justifications and explanations. In recent years, however, various "holistic" philosophies have reminded us of another basic human need. People perceive and remember information not as isolated bits but as sets, "structures," which are in some way applicable to their other personal concerns. We naturally seek meaning and purpose in the mass of information available to us. The need to recognize purpose is as fundamental as the need to manipulate; the question "Why?" is as inherent to our natures as the question "How?" In fact, questions of connection (Why?) are psychologically and rationally prior to questions of implementation (How?).

The importance of this principle to the question of writing is to remind us that to give precedence to means per se is contrary to natural human modes of thought. It may be convenient, but it is abnormal, to concentrate on how to measure things without knowing why. It may be convenient, but it is abnormal, to concentrate on the comparison-and-contrast method of structuring a paper without knowing why one is engaged in that activity at all. As this last example suggests, the way that we teach writing often reflects an approach through means, but an approach through ends may more nearly correspond to the natural way in which the mind assimilates information.

A great many composition courses now follow a pattern that derives from the classical "forms of discourse," of which there were four: Description, Exposition, Narration, and Argumentation. These forms have been further divided so that in many textbooks there are six or seven, or even more, such divisions: definition, description, narration, process analysis, comparison and contrast, division and classification, analogy, and so forth. To these divisions some textbooks add other techniques: metaphor, personification, induction and deduction. All of these categories, and others like them, represent ways of achieving something else, yet they are often taught as if they themselves were the achievment. "A student should know how to write a comparison-and-contrast paper." Yet in the nonacademic world there is no such thing as a comparison-and-contrast paper." No employer says, "Go write a 500-word comparison-and-contrast report for next Wednesday"; no tax return states, "Using analogy, clarify the nature of your occupation"; no local expert on Afghanistan is asked by the Lions Club, "Come talk to us by means of division and classification."

The point is that the traditional forms of discourse and their contemporary counterparts are, in themselves, merely techniques; they are means to an end. In isolation they are conveniences that obstruct as often as they facilitate good writing. Any composition course that takes techniques themselves as its structure and its goal is, in so doing, responding to one form of human need while doing violence to another: hence the boredom of freshmen who dutifully write one technique-paper after another, not knowing why (except to get a grade); hence the alienation often felt by the teacher, who cannot in conscience claim that to know half a dozen such techniques is to know much about making writing serve real needs; hence the frustration, even panic, felt by the teacher when a member of the class challenges this approach by bringing

in a newspaper, a magazine, or other samples of published writing and seeking in vain for pure examples of the textbook categories.

Some composition teachers seek an answer to this problem, or, more properly, a way of sidestepping it, by searching for ever more refined taxonomies of technique. One recent textbook adds "Texture" and "Climax" to its rhetorical categories. (Who ever saw a real piece of writing that fit those labels?) Composition staffs debate whether division and classification should be taught as one category or as two. Teachers struggle in the classroom to explain where analogy leaves off and metaphor begins. The basic approach remains unchanged: in whatever guise, with better or worse terminologies, it is an approach that responds to the human need to practice technique but not to the human need to recognize and fulfill purpose. And nothing is gained if one says that comparison-and-contrast (etc.) is the purspoe; the claim is merely absurd.

In the classical forms of discourse, from which the difficulty stems, also lies the beginning of a solution. The four modes suggest a hybridization of two concepts. The modes called Exposition, Description, and Narration represent primarily ways of arranging language. (We ignore here fictive narration, whether mimetic or didactic, because we are concerned with referential discourse.) On the other hand, the form called Argumentation represents a strong intention or purpose: argumentation is the effort to convince somebody of the validity of a viewpoint. Exposition, Description, and Narration imply technique; Argumentation implies purpose too. Since the four terms do not derive wholly from the same taxonomic system, as a group they are neither complete nor mutually exclusive. As Plato amply demonstrated in the Republic, narration is an excellent means of argumentation. The New Testament's parables serve the same purpose. Like Plato's "myths," their function is to argue for

the rightness of an interpretation.

Let us turn now to the approach through purposes, represented by the last-named of the classical forms. Argumentation is surely one of the most widely shared purposes for writing (or speaking). It can use, as befits the occasion, one or more techniques: narration, definition, description, process analysis, comparison and contrast, division and classification, induction and deduction, analogy, metaphor, even that odd fellow "climax," which presumably has something to do with emphasis and with pacing. The purpose of the piece of writing becomes paramount; and the writer selects whatever tools, instruments, and tactics seem most functional to that purpose, given the writer's sense of style, the subject-matter, and the audience.

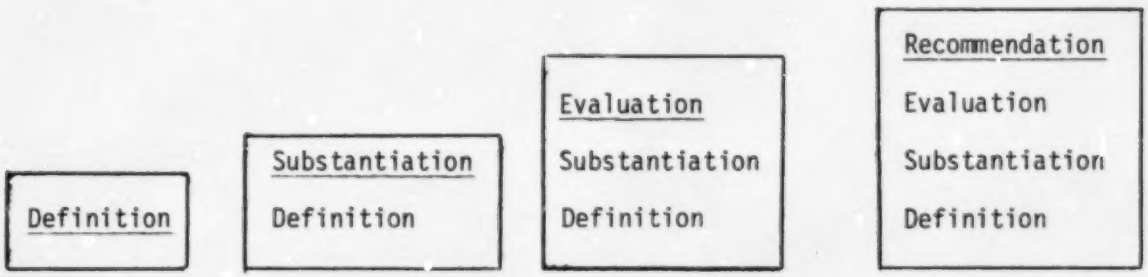
Assuming the priority of ends over means, of purpose over technique, what categories should be used in teaching writing?

In our experience, there are only four basic purposes for writing.

1. To clarify what the subject is (to define a word, to explain a concept, to report evidence);
2. To substantiate a thesis about the subject (to demonstrate that an inference or conclusion about it is valid);
3. To evaluate the subject (to judge it as good or bad with reference to utilitarian, ethical, or aesthetic standards);
4. To recommend that something be done about the subject (to persuade people to think or act differently about it).

Virtually all occasions for composition writing, we would submit, fall into one of these four categories, which we call Definition, Substantiation, Evaluation, and Recommendation. (Even the all but forgotten epideictic or demonstrative form can be subsumed here.) These terms are the names of <u>purposes</u>: of ends, not of means. The categories themselves are incremental. Definition or

clarification, while sometimes sufficient in itself, often functions as part of a piece of writing whose larger purpose is to substantiate a thesis, to evaluate, or to recommend; similarly the substantiation of a thesis, while sometimes sufficient in itself, often functions as part of a piece of writing whose larger purpose is to evaluate or to recommend; and evaluation, while sometimes sufficient in itself, often functions as part of a piece of writing whose larger purpose is to recommend.



Each purpose builds upon the one preceding it. Recommendation, the final category, embodies a cumulative purpose that is likely to involve the other three. A student who wants to convince his or her parents to support a year's study in England, for example, may need to define exactly what the academic program at the London School of Economics consists of, substantiate the claim that this program is more advanced or complete (or whatever) than the programs available in the United States, and establish the value of education abroad. These functions would form part of the larger purpose of making the proposal (the recommendation "Support me for a year in England") as persuasive as possible.

The approach through purposes incorporates, rather than cancels, the approach through technique. Techniques are presented as potentially useful in all four categories of writing, which is, in fact, the case: one can use comparison-and-contrast to define (clarify); to substantiate a thesis; to evaluate; to recommend. For instance, one can compare turtles and tortoises to

clarify the nature of both; one can compare the heights of American children in 1968 and 1978 to substantiate a thesis about growth patterns; one can compare two novels to evaluate the quality of characterization, using one as a standard of comparison against which to judge the other; one can compare the projected results of buying and renting houses to recommend that people in certain financial circumstances buy (or rent). Seen in the context of purpose, technique has meaning. Technique is a means to an end.

Teaching writing on the basis of purposes has certain advantages. The primary advantage is the greater resemblance to "real writing." Most students' papers are apprentice work, as the students themselves know, but it is far easier to point to nonacademic analogues of the categories of purpose than it is to point to examples of the techniques standing alone. An advertisement or editorial recommends that we accept a specified product, political viewpoint, or action. A film review evaluates this week's release. A magazine article substantiates the claim that ESP is (or is not) reliable; another magazine article defines and clarifies a new type of stereo component. Where more than one purpose seems to be present, this situation can be regarded as quite natural, since the purposes are often cooperative and incremental. The film reviewer needs to define a technical innovation in order for us to understand the judgment that the film is technically brilliant (or bungled).

A second advantage of the approach through purposes is that is permits students to see progress in their knowledge of rhetoric. When a course moves from narration to description to comparison and contrast to induction and deduction (or a similar sequence), there is no necessary connection between one category and the next. The course becomes fragmented--two weeks on narration, two weeks on description, two weeks on comparison and contrast (or however much time the syllabus permits); the technique, once learned, is perhaps never used

again. The structure seems arbitrary; and in fact it is arbitrary, since one might just as well begin at some other point in the series. Writing by means of techniques does not embody a rhetorical progression. Writing in accordance with purposes, however, does.

A corollary benefit to this approach is that it provides designations for models that students read, and joining reading with writing can be expected to enhance both skills. Instead of combing through essays to locate a "negative detail" paragraph or an analogy (that is not a metaphor) or a comparison (that is not a contrast), teachers and students alike can readily identify entire essays or parts in terms of purpose. Then they can examine the techniques used to achieve the purpose.

The two major advantages--a greater degree of resemblance to writing as practiced outside the classroom and a much stronger sense of incremental progress--would in themselves make the approach through purposes preferable. However, there is a third, although indirect, advantage to this approach.

The concentration on means (methods, processes, procedures, and so forth), which this paper began by discussing, has been part of our culture's flight from values. As long as our attention is engaged wholly in the details of the functioning of the activity, we are not likely to ask what the value or goal of the activity as a whole might be. It is ultimately dangerous, we submit, to teach expertise in technique apart from the question of what the technique is being used to accomplish. This is not the place for a general discussion of the political potential of language, but we would like simply to reiterate that rhetoric is a powerful and value-laden--not neutral--tool. The educated person should be more than a technician, an expert in the practice of technique. The educated person should also be aware of the purposes and effects of technique. The approach through purposes returns our emphasis, in

the teaching of composition, to first principles. What you want to accomplish surely claims priority over how to go about it. In bringing purpose to the fore, this approach also brings value-implications to the fore. Once the goal is stated, its appropriateness can be addressed.

A corollary to this foregrounding of purpose is that it moves writing and speaking closer together. To be sure, "edited language" in print will always differ radically from speech. But students learn quickly that a "speech act" fails to achieve its purpose if it violates either grammatical or social conventions. We make lexical, syntactic and tonal shifts in terms of our purpose and audience, and this continuous choice of means makes speech vital and dramatic. Awareness of this fact about speaking can sensitize students to similar possibilities in reading and writing. (That is why English teachers once upon a time required students to memorize the funeral speeches of Brutus and Antony.)

At this point, someone may ask, "Isn't teaching through purpose still a means that neglects questions about why a student should write at all?" Our answer is that the usual responses (success in a career, survival in college, discovery of self, or acquisition of control over our increasingly verbal environment) are themselves statements of purpose. Motivation to write becomes inseparable from the procedure that we recommend.

"Today we have naming of parts," wrote the poet Henry Reed, describing each element of a soldier's rifle. His purpose was to express bitterness and frustration at the way he was taught to kill by merely learning component parts: today this, tomorrow that, the next day something else . . . a rhetoric of means, without consideration of ends. If we permit technique to become predominant, we are not only making our task as teachers of writing harder by choosing an incomplete and unrealistic approach; we are also presenting the

activity of writing in a way that discourages the asking of important questions of purpose and value.